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REPORT ON PROGRESS IN IMPLEMENTING DECISION 2001/11: ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF THE TIME FRAME FOR DEVELOPING COUNTRY PROGRAMME DOCUMENTS

Report of the Administrator and the Executive Director

I. BACKGROUND

1. This report has been prepared in response to decision 2004/18, in which the Executive Board requested UNDP and UNFPA to consult with their partners in the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) on how to address, in a harmonized way, the increased time frame for developing country programmes and to report to the Board in 2005.

2. At the annual session 2004 of the Executive Board, UNDP and UNFPA presented a joint progress report (DP/2004/29-DP/FPA/2004/7) on progress in implementing decision 2001/11 on the UNDP/UNFPA programming process. The common country programming process is producing a more unified and strategic vision for country-level operational activities. However, the gains have not been as great as anticipated. Feedback from a number of sources points to the heaviness of the preparatory process and its lengthy duration (two years in a typical five-year cycle).

3. This document presents a number of proposals aimed at shortening the time needed to prepare and approve country programme documents. The document also proposes options for the future, which could shorten further the time frame between preparation and implementation. However, these options would require major changes to the current Executive Board approval process for the UNDG Executive Committee agencies. They will also require further consultation among the agencies and with their respective Executive Boards. UNDP and UNFPA seek guidance from the Board on these proposals, including on how to proceed with more far-reaching reforms for the future.

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II. STREAMLINING THE TIME FRAME FOR PREPARING AND APPROVING COUNTRY PROGRAMME DOCUMENTS

4. The rationale for considering a reduction in the time frame for developing and approving country programme documents is to avoid their becoming outdated by the time of their approval. Currently, a United Nations country team begins the analytical process two years prior to actual programme implementation. The goal of such a reduction is to ensure high-quality processes and documents that improve the timeliness and relevance of United Nations programmes, while ensuring adequate formal approval for them.

Shortening the preparation time for country programme documents

5. United Nations country teams are being advised to shorten the time frame for preparing country programme documents. This means starting the process later – that is, closer to the start of implementation – and reducing the time to complete the common country assessment (CCA). The updated guidelines for the CCA and United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) encourage United Nations country teams to begin the process no earlier than June, which is 18 months before the start of the programme (six months later than in the previous guidelines). The CCA is to be completed in three months. United Nations country teams are encouraged to make use of existing CCAs and other analyses, including poverty reduction strategies and United Nations agency reports.

6. To maintain and improve the quality of strategic planning, it would be difficult to develop the UNDAF in less than three months. Likewise, it would not be advisable to shorten the preparation time for country programme documents based on the UNDAF and its results matrix, as this could jeopardize the review with national partners and other stakeholders. The UNDAF would therefore start in September and be completed by the end of December. As is currently the case, the country programme documents would then be finalized and submitted to their respective organizations by March for review by the Boards in June.

7. A much shorter process could undermine the quality of the products and jeopardize participation and ownership by national governments and their partners. The above proposal seeks to balance the need to minimize the duration of the process with the need for high-quality products and ownership. Furthermore, the UNDG has put in place measures to offset the possible negative consequences of shortening the CCA process by providing high-quality, timely regional support and quality assurance through regional peer review groups.

Reducing the time required by the Executive Board to approve country programme documents

8. While fully respecting the right of the Board to review and comment on draft country programme documents, there may be scope, if the Board so wishes, to reduce the amount of time required between the submission of draft country programme documents and their approval by the Board. This period currently totals nine months – between the initial submission of draft country programme documents to the United Nations for translation and processing for the June session and their approval at the first regular session the following January.

9. This nine-month interval could be shortened if the Executive Board approved country programme documents at the first Board session following the session at which the draft country programme documents were submitted initially. This would reduce the approval period to approximately six months. This interval could be reduced further if the Executive Board used an electronic approval method to replace the current formal approval process that takes place at the first regular session in January.

10. To date, the majority of country programme documents have been approved without further discussion at the January sessions of the Executive Board. The current procedure, as per decision 2001/11, is that each country programme document is approved in January on a no-objection basis without presentation or discussion, unless at least five members of the Board have informed the secretariat in writing prior to the session of their wish to bring a particular country programme document before the Board.

11. That same procedure could apply to an electronic approval process. The Board might wish to approve country programme documents automatically within two months of the Executive Board session at which the country programme document was submitted, unless five or more Board members have indicated via e-mail their wish to bring the country programme document before the Board for further discussion. This two-month period is considered sufficient for the country programme document to be revised, if necessary, in light of comments made when the Board reviewed the document and for the revised country programme document to be posted on the websites of the Executive Board secretariat.

12. This proposal would reduce the approval period from the current seven months to two months. It would also avoid having to schedule the formal approval of country programme documents as an agenda item for Executive Board sessions. Instead, a country programme document would appear on the agenda a second time only if five or more Board members requested further discussion of that country programme document.

III. FURTHER SIMPLIFICATION AND STREAMLINING OF THE COUNTRY PROGRAMME PREPARATION AND APPROVAL PROCESS

13. The above proposals – to shorten both the time needed to prepare and approve country programme documents – generate significant savings in time. The measures proposed require guidance from the respective Executive Boards. There is consensus within the UNDG Executive Committee agencies that such measures are feasible if desired by the respective Boards.

14. Initial discussions have taken place among the Executive Committee agencies concerning more far-reaching options. These ideas, presented below, require further discussion among the agencies at headquarters and in the field; they also require major changes in the current procedures that the respective Executive Boards have adopted. As such, they should be considered only as initial contributions to the debate.

Greater flexibility in submitting draft country programme documents to any Board session

15. Additional savings in time could occur if a more flexible approach to submitting draft country programme documents were acceptable to the respective Executive Boards. Currently, the majority of draft country programme documents are submitted for review at the annual session in June. In exceptional

cases, draft country programme documents may be submitted to the second regular session in September, when country circumstances warrant. In such cases, the United Nations country team as well as the respective UNDG regional directors must agree that the draft country programme document may be presented in September instead of June. In cases where the Executive Board reviews a draft country programme document at the September session, the approval time by the Board is reduced to three months so that the programme may begin the following January.

16. One option would be to allow, as the norm, the submission of draft country programme documents to the September session, in order to further shorten the gap between programme preparation, approval and implementation, because the process could begin an additional three months later. In such a scenario, CCAs would begin in September; the UNDAF would be finalized in March; and the draft country programme documents would be submitted to their respective organizations in May, for editing and onward transmittal to the United Nations. For this to occur, current procedures within the different Executive Boards and Executive Committee agencies would have to be revised.

17. A more far-reaching issue for discussion is whether or not country programmes should be able to follow national cycles rather than having all of them begin their cycles in January, and whether or not country programme documents could be presented on a more flexible basis, not just at the annual session in June or at the second regular session in September. The principle underlying the timing of a country programme could become one that reflects as closely as possible the national planning cycle of the country concerned.

18. Not all countries have planning and/or national budgeting cycles that commence in January. Several countries begin their fiscal and planning years in July, for example. While it may be difficult to link the Executive Board country programme approval process to the preparation of government planning processes at the national level, which may be prone to delay, the flexibility to ensure as close a link as possible (as recently underlined in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness adopted at the High-Level Forum in March 2005), should be taken into consideration. At the very least, the development and implementation of country programmes should be aligned to support national processes and priorities by offering substantive support throughout the national planning and implementation processes.

Simplifying programme preparation

19. The country programme preparation process currently requires the elaboration of a CCA and UNDAF as well as a country programme document and a country programme action plan for each UNDG Executive Committee agency. One proposal that might be considered would be to eliminate the country programme document in its current format and replace it with a common country programme document for all United Nations agencies, based on the UNDAF and its results matrix. Alternatively, if the UNDAF and its results matrix were revised, they could be used as the common country programme document. For either of these two reforms, questions remain about how and where a governing body would approve the operations of a United Nations entity in a country. One option might be for each Executive Board to review the elements of the UNDAF and the results matrix that pertain to the respective agency, together with a summary of programme resource allocations.

20. Through its work on the joint office model, the UNDG Executive Committee agencies are considering the programme implications of a more streamlined common country programme. Experience

from this pilot project will inform discussions within the UNDG programme group on how to simplify further the programme preparation process. The UNDG programme group is also gathering experience from United Nations country teams on the steps that could be taken to simplify existing procedures.

21. Such proposals require full discussion within and across the organizations concerned. At this stage, the Executive Board is invited to provide guidance, including on time frames that may guide the ensuing discussions in United Nations funds, agencies and programmes, so that specific proposals to simplify further the country programming process may be submitted. From 2008, all country programmes are expected to apply common programming procedures under harmonized cycles; therefore, a decision from the respective Boards on the timing and nature of further simplification for the preparation and approval process of country programme documents would be most welcome.

IV. RECOMMENDATION

22. The Executive Board may wish to take note of the present document (DP/2005/28-DP/FPA/2005/10) and provide guidance on the timing and nature of further simplification for the preparation and approval process of country programme documents.